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Blockbuster genres in Danish independent film

Work in progress

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My interest in my paper is the developing Danish independent film scene and it will be a short version of the paper available online.

The Danish indie scene has, throughout the past decade, grown from being amateur home productions to smaller, more self-aware production companies. What I find interesting about this development is the fact that many of the indie filmmakers do not as such react against mainstream, blockbuster market dominance. They respond, instead, by delving directly into international blockbuster genres and styles in the search for something missing in Danish cinema.

This works, principally, by *directly* reacting against the institutional and economic dominance and protectionism of primarily The Danish Film Institute. *Indirectly*, the filmmakers seem to react against ‘what is allowed’ in Danish film culture. Therefore, they actually define themselves as being non-mainstream by focussing on international mainstream genres.

By way of examples from the Danish indie scene and interviews with indie filmmakers, my paper draws attention to a still fairly anonymous trend in Danish film. My talk here may in fact be the first most of you hear about the titles I mention. I do, however, firstly have a few conceptual remarks.

Already accentuated in his book title, Michael Z. Newman locates *independent cinema* as “an American film culture” (Newman, 2011). Of course, the concept in itself has its roots in American cinema and has existed almost as long as film production has been going on.

Through the history of American cinema, independent cinema has been more or less referred to as being in opposition to Hollywood – defined as both “a literal place and a state of mind” (Holm, 2008: 17). I cannot delve deeply into this conceptual discussion here, but a few things seem to be certain if we confer with titles dealing with indie film cultures: a) the idea of independence is by all means difficult to define; b) independency is a historical variable that evolves in relation to a film culture at a certain time and place; c) theory of independent cinema needs a contextual approach (e.g. Holm, 2008; Horsley, 2005; Merritt, 2000; King, 2005; Newman, 2011).

One obvious question may therefore be: Why do I use ‘independent cinema’ as a term if it is so vague and imprecise? I do so because a wide range of directors, producers, actors and screenwriters in Danish cinema employ the term as a way of assigning themselves a certain – voluntary or imposed – role in the Danish film culture. The association *IndieFILM Denmark* – founded by producer, actor, and director Mustafa Ali in 2010 – underlines the appropriation of the concept in the name of the organisation.

Director and actor Kim Sønderholm emphasizes the term’s usefulness with reference to the fact that a lot of the filmmakers – though they are not necessarily widely known – actually make a living in the film industry as such. He objects, hence, to the idea of ‘amateur cinema’ and shows some reluctance towards a reference to ‘underground film’, because Danish independent cinema for the most part is involuntarily underground. Sønderholm describes the concept as a way of showing that there are filmmakers who are doing something different from mainstream Danish film production (Hansen, 2013a).

D.K. Holm refers to the fact that the concept of independent cinema – by way of for instance Miramax – may have lost its value because it has become “a marketing tool” (Holm, 2008: 13). Danish independent cinema may have a hint of this, but the appropriation of the term is, in this case, rather an attempt to gain a voice in a culture dominated by powerful actors in a film culture. This culture – reply several of my interview respondents – is stylistically and generically marked by *social realism* or *folk comedy*.

Is this, then, something new in Danish film? Not really. Danish film culture has, at least throughout the second half of the last century, given birth to interesting oppositions to the establishment. However, please confer my paper online if your interested in this part of the discussion.

It may, as well, be doubtful that all new, small and low-budget Danish production companies should be viewed as reacting in exactly the *same* way towards the system. Production companies such as Lone Tower Visuals, Last Exit Productions and Cetus Productions are in different ways direct reactions towards the establishment, while companies such as Roberta Film and Bullitt Film produce low-scale productions while still considering themselves a part of an overall Danish film culture.

Through the last decade or so, we have seen a wide range of new and small Danish production companies show up. D.K. Holm writes that independent cinema throughout film history generally “mirrors advances in light-weight and inexpensive filmmaking technology” (Holm, 2008: 22). If that is the case, and it very much seems so, the recent digital development of recording

equipment may be viewed as the sounding board underneath indies in the 21st Century. This goes for international independent film – with prevalent examples such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) – as well. A specific genre or style such as ‘found-footage-film’ may have developed out of cheaper digital equipment.

This development has influenced Danish indies as well: What IndieFILM Denmark does for upcoming filmmakers is for instance, among other things, to put recording and editing equipment at the producers’ disposal. Anything goes, it seems, if the digital devices are used in a noteworthy stylistic manner. Your smartphone may even be a tool for film aesthetics.

Newman focuses on what he calls ‘indie realism’, which is a way of describing American independent cinema in terms of character based drama, social engagement of the narrative and naturalistic stylistics and themes (Newman, 2011: 87-140). This does, of course, not apply to all productions in an indie culture that shows significant inclinations towards horror and pulp. Of course, this special attention to realistic styles and narratives in American independent film is a reaction towards Hollywood’s so-called “dream factory”. It, then, suggest a different approach to dissociation from the establishment than in Danish cinema where character drama, social engagement and naturalism have been a mainstream trend. The Irish-Danish director David Noel Bourke says about the scope of the Danish Film Institute: “It seems there is a trend for more "socio-realistic" films, light comedies, children's films”.

Several of my respondents claim that it is especially hard to receive attention from the film institute if the project is considered a piece of genre cinema. “For a long time”, says director Svend Ploug Johansen, “it has been a joke in the horror environment that the film institute only supports social realism or folk comedy” (Lindberg, 2012: 26). What we see in Danish indiefilm, then, is a prevalent attention towards the genres and styles that receive very little overall attention in the established Danish film culture.

Regarding horror, Kim Sønderholm is a leading figure on the Danish indie scene. However, he has recently been pursuing an international career, but he is frequently used as an actor in Danish indies. His focus has, from the start, been horror seasoned with elements from thrillers and the slasher. His debut film *Craig* (2008) is a lengthy study into the mind of a serial killer – a theme he reuses from his short film “Mental Distortion” (2008). His two next movies, *Tour de Force* (2010) and *Little Big Boy* (2012) follow similar trends, however, with a taste of gangster action in *Tour de Force*. Sønderholm’s interest in horror is not only an aesthetic practice, but he employs horror as a special indie strategy: He says: “Luckily, especially the horror

genre has so incredibly many fans who, at any price, want see whatever they can find. Principally, it is a question of supply and demand” (Hansen, 2013a). This strategy has lead Sønderholm – and his films – into the English speaking market where his films have received some critical attention.

Several other directors in the indie environment focus on horror. The above mentioned Ploug Johansen calls his films “indie-horror” and has, until now, directed the two short horror films: “Skizo” (2008) and “Ansigtet” [“The Face”] (2012). In addition, he directed a horror version of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The story of a mother” for the author’s anniversary year. His film “Ansigtet” was included in the compilation dvd *Supernatural Tales* (2012) that includes sixteen Danish indie short horror films. In between the two we find the post-apocalyptic short film “Global Alarm” (2009) – a theme that was taken up by a number of indie directors in the film festival MovieBattle 2010 and released on the compilation dvd *Wasteland Tales* (2010).

Nicolas Russel Bennetzon’s *Glimt* [*Glimpse*] (2006) is another noteworthy horror example: it is the first attempt to direct a Danish j-horror film. Casper Haugegaard’s *Opstandelsen* [*The Resurrection*] (2010) is the first Danish zombie-film. Slasher horror, besides Sønderholm’s films, takes up some space as well: David Noel Bourke’s *Last Exit* (2003) and Emil Ishii’s *Rovdrift* [*Ruthless Exploitation*] (2009) are in this case good examples.

In all, this special attention to horror on the indie scene is in some way a reaction towards a genre that receives little attention in the overall film culture. However, internationally there is as well a certain drift, mentioned by Sønderholm, towards horror within various indie cultures – usually termed *sleaze cinema*. Indie horror in Denmark seems, then, to be going both ways: There’s a search for a cult horror hit on the one hand while the producers on the other hand, it seems, would not turn down potential subsidies from the institute.

The Chilean-Danish director Shaky González has been playing a weighty role in Danish independent cinema for over fifteen years. He debuted with *Nattens engel* [*Angel of the Night*] (1998) – one of the very few Danish vampire films – and followed up with *One Hell of a Christmas* (2002). González has returned to horror in his short film “One Last Wish” (2005), included in the compilation film *Speak of the Devil* (2005).

However, González is as well interesting because he introduces genres and styles in Danish cinema that are missing or at least very rare. His post-apocalyptic short film “The Last Warrior” (2010) is mainly a spoof of 80’s action-adventure films such as the *Mad Max*-series (1979-85) and *Conan*

the Barbarian (1982). Underlining the action-adventure spoof, Eric Holmey replays his own role from *Conan the Barbarian*. Interestingly enough, the short film ends in a dance scene referring specifically to Bollywood (which may be a indication of González' current work in progress, which – according to the film's producer Mustafa Ali – is the first Bollywood-film produced by a Danish company).

González' third feature film *Pistoleros* (2007) is, then, an action film and a gangster drama in the style of Robert Rodriguez which basically means the ironic, humorous, violent exploitation action style sometimes referred to as *grindhouse*. In this way, González' genre interests connect the two most conspicuous genres on the indie scene: horror and gangster action. Gangster action is, generally, a very present genre or style among Danish indies. Jonas Kvist Jensen's *Brutal Incasso* (2005) – co-written by Kim Sønderholm – appropriates Rodriguez' aesthetic violence with an evident hint at Quentin Tarantino's early films. Dennis Bahnsen's *Krokodillerne* [*The Crocodiles*] has a scent of the same while at the same time drawing heavily on Lasse Spang Olsen's Danish action comedies.

In two short films Philip Th. Pedersen picks up the gangster drama in very different ways: "The Fro" (2011) is a spoof of a humorous blackspoitation gangster drama while "Små mænd" ["Little men"] is more in tune with socio-realistic gangster films such as Nicholas Winding Refns *Pusher*-trilogy. "Små mænd" focus on the relationship between Danish gangsters and integration, which as well is an incorporated component in Kaywan Mohsens low-budget productions *Eye for Eye* (2008) and *Made in Denmark* (2008). Dennis Petersen's *Det perfekte kup* [*The Perfect Heist*] (2008), though, is more in tune with the mentioned lightweight Danish gangster comedies, a sort of a rough version of *Olsen Banden* (1968-2008).

In these observations made here there seems to be a gradual transition from being truly independent (dubbed "guerrilla style" by David Noel Bourke) towards being a part of the establishment. Hesitance towards the film institute comes directly from its reluctance towards genre cinema, which indirectly means that indie directors fear losing control of their projects if they were to do what it takes to be granted subsidies.

Studying independent cinema in Denmark is, then, an interesting and backwards way of reading the experience of power relations and control mechanisms in the system. If, then, independent cinema – claimed by D.K. Holm – should be viewed as *a myth*, it is by all means a very powerful one.